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THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS 'People Who Need People'

BY LEONARD FOLEY, OFM

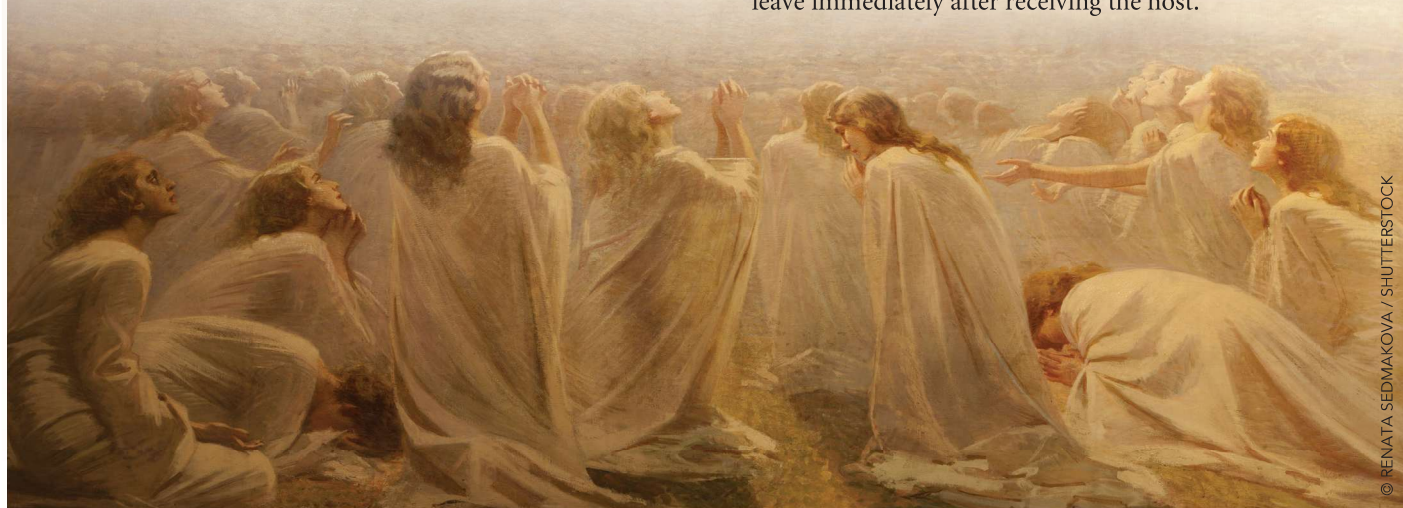
Our weekday parish Masses are celebrated in a small side chapel of the church. We're in a crossroads area of a large city, so we get a great variety of people. We sit together, around a small square altar. Some smile shyly as they enter. More just find a seat and stare into space.

Donna is there, praying for her dying husband, who is with her. The "Colonel" and his wife are in their usual places, right in front of the altar. Three sisters from the prayer house, one in habit, make their weekly visit. And old Mrs. Nimms is there, holy pictures protruding from her blouse pocket, rosaries around her neck.

An "inactive" priest sits in the corner. Three girls from the university are there, serious: It's exams week. A large gentleman in a three-piece suit pages gravely through the missalette. Mary, her hair twisted into a semblance of order, looks eagerly at each newcomer, hoping for a smile of recognition—she's on leave from the "psych" ward at St. Elizabeth's.

It is arrogant to judge this group and I certainly include myself in it, but I can't help thinking of St. Paul's unflattering words to his parish in Corinth: "...Not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. Rather, God chose the foolish of the world to shame the wise, and God chose the weak of the world to shame the strong, (1 Corinthians 1:26–27).

But the Irish in me (or is it the German?) sees a vision. I see this little group as one of God's living communities. There is something in the heart of everyone present—though it may be small for some—that is shared by all: a willingness to be led by a vision of faith; a willingness to "hang in there" despite worldly sentiment that says belief is wishful thinking and patience is unrealistic. Maybe they don't like to sit so close to each other. Only the sisters and Mrs. Nimms embrace everyone vigorously at the kiss of peace. Not everybody volunteers a petition at the general intercessions. Several leave immediately after receiving the host.



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I. THE CHURCH ON EARTH

Regardless, in this strangely variegated group there is a sense of belonging. There is Something here that draws us together.

Sometimes the young priests give everyone a host before starting the “Lamb of God.” After these prayers, each one swallows his or her host simultaneously. Think of that: the one Jesus shared by all fifteen people. The one Spirit of Jesus poured out into fifteen hearts. The mind of Jesus giving light to each one. A community of “saints.” I realize that these people are holy (saints)—as used in the New Testament—not big, famous saints but everyday people. Some broken with tragedy, grief or perhaps sin, but who are made holy by God’s presence. They (we) are a community, a living unity, like the apostles at the Last Supper. They weren’t very likely saints, either!

This is true of all eucharistic gatherings around the world. All of them, together with many other holy people besides, form the earthly branch of the communion of saints. This is what God had in mind—a community of the world whose primary purpose in life is loving each other and their saving God. Everything else is secondary.

If this plan of God works (aye, there’s the rub), our little group and all similar groups will share Jesus’ love with each other and all we meet. Yes, we will fail, but we will come back tomorrow or Sunday and start all over again. We are “The Not Quite Healed Society.” But if we let this eucharistic ritual reveal the action of God, we will be convinced that we belong. We aren’t a random collection of people but rather a communion of grace-filled brothers and sisters.

Describing the reality, the Church lived the communion of saints long before it started using the expression. It wasn’t until around the fifth century that it was put into the Apostles’ Creed as an emphatic statement that the Church and the kingdom—or the People of God—is a community, not a loose gathering of people seeking private salvation. The phrase expresses the obvious: God sent Jesus to put his arms around all God’s children, to draw them into one large family, and to teach them to pass the welcome along. Pope Leo XIII said: “The communion of saints is simply...the mutual sharing of help, atonement, prayers and benefits among all the faithful.”

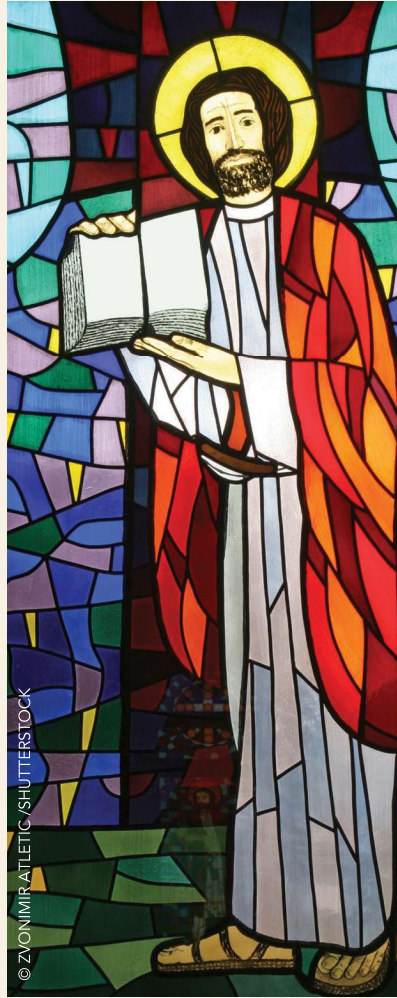
We share what God gives us. But how does Mary with the twisted hair share with me? She could hardly put into

words the rudiments of the faith! And I’m a priest, with years of theology! But thinking this way is a fatal error, a worldly viewpoint. The fact is, we are all—Mary, Mrs. Nimms, and I—extremely lucky to have been given God’s gift of life in the first place. We have been invited in, beggars all, to the banquet.

We’re in this together or we’re not in it at all. God could not make people who don’t need other people. As members of the body of Christ, we suffer and rejoice together. “If one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members share its joy” (1 Corinthians 12:26).

This doesn’t mean, of course, that the supply of grace in the body of Christ goes down, like mercury in a thermometer. It means that all of us (like a body whose foot is pierced with a thorn) feel pain if God’s love is rejected or betrayed by anyone, especially a member of the body. We do not judge them, but the scandal is there. The opposite is true when we witness goodness. If we’re people of faith, we are happy about all the good we see happening on earth.

When we sense—through the eyes of faith—the gift of a “communion of goodness and love” all around the world, we are getting a glimpse of what it means to be the “Communion of Saints, Branch 1, Earth People.” This is what the catechism used to refer to as the Church Militant—the Church on earth fighting the good fight, as it were. Maybe the “Church Coming Alive” is a better phrase. The catechism also used to refer to two other branches of the communion of saints: the “Church Triumphant” (in heaven) and the “Church Suffering” (in purgatory). Let’s examine these branches with terminology and viewpoints more compatible with our times.



II. THE CHURCH IN HEAVEN

Our little group senses, perhaps only dimly, that we are only the tip of the iceberg. We hear the celebrant say, “From age to age you gather a people to yourself,” and that they are destined to “share eternal life with Mary, the Virgin Mother of God, with the apostles and with all the saints who have done your will throughout the ages.” We ask God to “remember your Church throughout the world,” “the entire people your Son has gained for you.” “Accept this offering from your whole family.”

What the Church tells us is that we belong to a community that includes the Blessed Mother, Peter and John and Francis and Teresa. A friend of mine says she has always thought of the communion of saints as a great circle of people with hands

joined, praying. Many of the people are visible, but many are not—they have gone on, into eternity. But their hands are joined to ours, as in “Hands Across America.”

So, besides the tip of the iceberg, there are all kinds of saints present. The canonized ones who appear in that big Latin book called the *Martyrology* from which the monks read a portion each morning might number a million (my best guess). These are the heroes and heroines. They are the “cloud of witnesses” who inspire us to believe that there will be a final communion when we will all be together. They are the ones who let God’s love fill them totally. Often they are famous because they met a particular challenge of history. Remembering all of those not canonized. Think of the special friends you have in heaven. I know I can come up with quite a lengthy list off the top of my head. You have the same kind of list. Your friends and mine are all united now in a happiness we can only guess at.

III. THAT OTHER GROUP OF SAINTS

If you remember your catechism, you know that there’s a third branch of the communion of saints—the holy people who are in purgatory. Though they have sometimes been called “The Church Suffering,” that notion can be exaggerated. Let’s say it again: Purgatory is not a flaming concentration camp on the lip of hell. It is not a place, just as healing and loving are not places. The doctrine of purgatory is simply this: if—and that may be a big if—a person dies with a low-grade fever called venial sin (an attitude that holds one back from accepting God all the way), then obviously that person has to let God heal this “minor” sinfulness before he or she can be totally joined to the all-pure God. How does this happen? I don’t know. How long does it take? I don’t know.

Maybe purgatory is simply another way of saying it’s not the creature’s but rather the Creator’s prerogative to say when a person is fully reconciled and fit for perfect union with God. It is a process, not a place. And souls who are undergoing this process are not poor nor are they abandoned. They are saints, too. They just need final purification.

WE’RE IN THIS TOGETHER

There is a deadly attitude that can poison my life. It can be expressed very logically: My salvation depends on me. I am the one who has to work hard, try and try again, be faithful. Then some day I will get my reward. I hope you get your reward, too, but that’s your problem, not mine. What’s wrong with fighting my way to the top? Two things. First, we usually have to step on someone’s face as we go up the ladder. Second, in Jesus’ plan of life there should be no top to climb to.

We are not saved as isolated individuals. We go to God together or we don’t go at all. Isn’t that absurd? Aren’t we to create a safe zone around ourselves where we are protected from people we don’t want to deal with?

The fact is, God could not make people who would be “normal” human beings living that way. God couldn’t make

people who don’t need people. What is it all about, then? What is the essence of life? It is to be saved from our selfishness and incompleteness by accepting membership in God’s communion.

BELOW THE SURFACE: A COMMUNION

But let’s go back to our little group around the altar in our small chapel. If we can finally have a humble, trusting confidence that by some miracle we can be called holy, we realize that this little circle of fifteen has a certain unity—even though some want a lot of space around themselves. The more bizarre the group, the more I must accept the fact of unity.

Do I have to love Mrs. Nimms, and her babbling about the latest vision she’s had? I’m sure the Colonel and his wife, staunch traditionalists, would think my theology is a betrayal of all they were taught. Am I in communion with these people? Or should I wait for real communion when only my friends are there? People who think right, like me.

I know what the answer is: Jesus embraces these people as his friends and tells us, “If you love me, love them. Not patronizingly, as if it were a big deal. Don’t ever say, ‘I’ll love them, even though....’ My Spirit makes them one. Beneath the differences, the absurdities, yes, even the weakness of faith, there is a life: one life, one body. A union. A communion. A communion of saints.”

And we must take this communion beyond the chapel. After Mass the fifteen go out into the world. Around the world, thousands, perhaps millions, are doing the same thing. In that world, some are seen as losers. And the world dismisses them as having no value. For the gods of the marketplace are power, pleasure, prestige, and individual success. Has God failed? Of course not. The Christian vision of what constitutes success is something different. It’s called loving community. And in every nook and cranny of the world, this kind of community exists. In a packed noon Mass in downtown Chicago, in a family laughing together at dinner, in a Beirut jail, in a nurse patiently feeding a dying old lady. Nothing can destroy this community/communion. It is possible that one part of it—even a country—lets its life die. No matter. The worldwide living union continues with new growth in an unlikely part of the world. It must be so. God cannot fail. God’s eternal plan to save the world in spite of itself cannot be thwarted. There is, and there always will be, a body of saints, joined in one life, one love. With an unspectacular exterior perhaps, like our fifteen people, but nevertheless rock solid, with a life that is immortal, unquenchable—divine.

PRAYING TO THE SAINTS

It is a long-standing Christian tradition that the saints in heaven pray for God’s children on earth, and we in turn honor them for the great gifts God has given them and ask them for their help and prayers. This creates a problem for some of our fellow Christians. They insist that there is only one

mediator between God and humanity: Jesus. Vatican II deals with the question this way, speaking of Mary: “The maternal duty of Mary toward men [and women] in no way obscures or diminishes this unique mediation of Christ, but rather shows its power.” The title “Mediatrix” and similar ones are to be understood as such that they neither take away from, nor add anything to the dignity and efficacy of Christ, the one mediator” (Constitution on the Church, 60, 62).

This must be said. No saint has power to give us the grace of God. Yet, as Vatican II also says, just as the priesthood of Christ is shared in various ways by both priests and the faithful, so the unique mediation of Christ allows for a manifold cooperation by people. Holy instinct prompts us to speak to the saints. Haven’t you automatically asked for your mother or dad’s help from heaven when you were in a tight fix, depressed, or excited? I’ve often spoken to them, sending a simple, “Help me” and certainly I know they have no power apart from Christ. Yet if I automatically ask people on earth to pray for me, why not those whom God has taken to himself?

A SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITY

Joe was dying. And Joe was only twenty-six. I had a few years on him, but death was still a stranger to me, a macabre figure who sometimes lurked at the edge of an accident scene but more often appeared at the bedside of the very old.

Someone had called our pastor. We were welcome to use the church, he said, but none of the parish priests would be home. And so it happened that a group of people gathered in the church on a Sunday afternoon in 1968. Joe’s best friend, an ex-seminarian, was familiar with the Church’s prayers for the dying; he put that structure to the service of our aching hearts. And we prayed the Litany of the Saints for Joe. “Pray for him,” we begged Mary, the patriarchs, the prophets and a long lineup of saints.

And then something strange began to happen. As we worked our way down the list of great saints, I had a sense that

the empty pews were filling. Joseph, Andrew and Stephen, Catherine and Teresa—one by one they took their places as we called their names. No longer were we a little group of sad and frightened friends. We were part of an immense throng celebrating a grand sendoff, speeding Joe home.

For years, I didn’t tell anyone how I had watched that church fill. Someone might think I was crazy. I wasn’t sure of my sanity myself. Then one day a priest friend spoke of his ordination. He recalled lying face down on the sanctuary floor, feeling unworthy, uncertain that he would be a good priest. Suddenly he felt greatly consoled in being part of this great communion of saints—the living assembly surrounding him as well as the great saints of the past who were being invoked. These saintly brothers and sisters comforted, sustained, and reassured him that he was not alone. So I’m not crazy after all. Communion and community are two words with one root—two words for one reality—a reality of people who love and support one another.

IV. WE NEED EACH OTHER

I need them to be saved. That is, first, I have to accept every single one of them as precious in God’s sight, love them according to my ability, welcome them, never rise in conceit above any other persons, however lowly the world might perceive them. I need them as witnesses of the faith. They say implicitly to me every time they come to Mass: “Lord, it is good for us to be here. We are your communion. We trust you, and thank you, and beg your continued love.” I need these people to keep me believing that the whole thing is not absurd, that it is all worthwhile, that a compassionate God wants us all—those now living and those who have already died in God’s love—to find full life as a communion of saints.

Leonard Foley, OFM, author of many books and articles during his lifetime, including many Catholic Updates.

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